

Unstable Democracy: How a History of Coup d'état Sculpted Populism in Modern Turkey

Research Thesis

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Introduction

While often understood as a recent phenomenon, populism has a long and storied history in Turkish politics that dates back to the first multiparty elections in 1946. Since 1950, not only has a populist party consistently appeared on the election ticket, but these parties have often garnered hefty support and elections have often resulted in a populist party either holding the majority of cabinet positions or participating in a coalition government.¹ Yet during the 20th century, the power of populist parties has repeatedly been curtailed by military interventionism, culminating in three successful coups (1960, 1971, 1980), and one “post-modern” coup in 1997.² In each of these instances, the military and the political elite aimed to use their influence and support as a check on the rise of populist leaders and movements. With each coup, the political landscape and the role of populism began to change. The coups of the 20th century were met with a high degree of public support, as they were framed as actions to restore order or as necessary precautions for the preservation of Kemalist ideals.³ Yet with the rise of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) over the past two decades, and the establishment of the party under current president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a populist party has been allowed to flourish.⁴ Similarly to the past trajectories of populist parties, in 2016 a coup attempt was carried out against the AKP; yet, this time the coup attempt was both unsuccessful and wildly unpopular amongst Turks. This raises the question: what changed?

For better or for worse, coups are a part of the collective memory of Turks living both within Turkey and abroad.⁵ Through the study of past coups, one begins to see a pattern emerging. Populist parties garner support, gain political power, and are subsequently eliminated by the military and political elite when they become too powerful. This cycle repeated itself numerous times throughout the 20th century. But this pattern changed in 2016 with the failed

coup attempt against the AKP. In this thesis, I examine how the AKP—a populist party that emerged from the remnants of parties that were eliminated in the 1997 coup—has thrived in an environment that has systematically quelled the rise of previous populist parties.⁶ To explain this, I explore the historical development of the Turkish political system dating back to the creation of the modern state. I then use the coups in Turkey as a lens for understanding populism in the nation today, by studying the rise and fall of political organizations and parties with ideals contrary to those of the military. I argue that the continued legacy of defunct political parties has ensured the ever-presence of a populist party in Turkish politics, with its modern rendition being the AKP.

Building on this foundation, I analyze the AKP’s rise to power and examine the steps taken by the party to ensure its continued survival and its ability to thrive as a populist and Islamist party. Through the use of polling data, newspaper sources, and academic literature, I aim to answer the question of how the history of coups shaped the modern populist movement as embodied by the AKP. I argue that the AKP, learning from a history of coups, skillfully crafted a platform that would grant it access to the highest levels of government while appearing relatively benign to the military, unlike its previous counterparts. Once the AKP had gained a majority in parliament, Erdoğan and his party began the long process of dismantling the system that has, historically, prevented the rise of populist parties.⁷ Through a mass crackdown on the so-called “deep state” in Turkey, the ruling party was able to preemptively undermine any attempt at overthrowing the regime. The failed coup attempt in 2016 all but sealed the fate of this non-democratic counter-weight that had prevented the rise of populism in the past, as the AKP used the coup to justify mass purges and power grabs, gutting the military and any semblance of opposition power.

The actions taken by the AKP since its rise to power in 2002 have forever shaped the political landscape of Turkey. By undermining what had become a traditional system of countering the rise of populism—military intervention—this populist regime has expanded its power. However, removing the potential for a non-democratic response to populism may not have contributed to a more free and democratic state, though this was highly debated in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt.⁸ I argue that it, in fact, removed the most effective mechanism historically available in Turkey for preventing the rise of authoritarian figures, and in doing so paved the way for the rise of Erdoğan and a more extreme version of the AKP's rhetoric and actions.

I conclude by exploring what the failed coup attempt means for the future of populism in Turkey and the nation's relationship with the military. In short, I argue that the failed coup attempt that occurred in 2016 would ultimately be used as grounds for delivering the final blow to the military and opposition forces. The removal of dissenting figures allowed populism to thrive in a system that no longer maintained the ability to quell it. Thus, we must consider whether the lack of military interventionism signals the success of populism in Turkey.⁹ Or is this yet another shift farther away from a democratic system?

Populism and Islam in Turkey

Populism, at its core, is defined as a political movement that claims to represent the interests of the common people and not those of the ruling financial or political elite.¹⁰ While this is the broadly accepted international definition—and the definition used within this piece—it is important to distinguish this description from the one outlined in the earliest years of the Turkish Republic. The term “populism” is deeply ingrained in the history of the Turkish nation. Populism was one of the *Altı Ok* (Six Arrows) of Kemalism, the founding principles that were put forward in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the nation’s founder. However, this definition of “populism” more heavily emphasized the notion of putting the interests of the entire nation above those of one individual or subgroup of individuals.¹¹ This definition aligns more closely with the modern concepts of nationalism or nationalistic populism. It is important to note that populism as defined by the Kemalists is not the definition used to describe the political parties/movements within this paper.

Throughout this paper, I will argue that populism has played a key role within Turkish politics, so to better understand populism beyond its base definition it is worth noting that it does not exist independent from other “isms” in the social or political realms. The “brand” of populism in modern Turkey is often considered a form of religious or identity-based populism and is almost always linked with Islamic values or an Islamic identity. Though Turkey was a nation founded on the principles of secular nationalism, religion has remained an important identity marker for many Turks.¹² As of 2017, 99.8% of Turkey's population identified as Muslim, and the country has maintained a majority Muslim population since the founding of the

Republic in 1923.¹³ⁱ The type of populism that is key to my argument is often accompanied by the title of “Islamism”. Although the term Islamism has been used and misused in different ways, in the context of this paper, Islamism will be defined as an ideology that uses selective postulates from Islam to form the foundation of a political platform and is critical to the formation of national identity.¹⁴

A History of Turkish Coups

With the coups of the 20th century being critical to our understanding of the current state of populism in Turkey, I aim to provide an outline of events that are crucial to the rise of the most successful populist political party in Turkish history: the AKP. Until the mid-20th century, the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP), the party of Atatürk and the cornerstone of the Turkish Republic, exclusively dominated the political scheme. In 1946, Adnan Menderes, a member of the ruling party and a vocal critic of the government, was expelled from the CHP and founded the *Demokrat Parti* (DP).¹⁵ This was the first party to stand in opposition to the CHP, resulting in the first multiparty elections since the founding of the republic.¹⁶ After sweeping the polls in the 1950 general election, the DP tilted the balance of power towards a moderate Islamist and populist party.¹⁷ This unprecedented victory would subsequently transition the CHP into an opposition party, a status that it retains to this day. For the first time since the founding of the republic, a political party openly challenged the secularist ideals of the Kemalist state.

Acknowledging, and arguably capitalizing on, the deep-rooted religious fervor that was present

ⁱ While the nation-state emerged out of the remnants of a multiconfessional empire, citizenship and state identity in Turkey were defined by two criteria: the ability to speak the Turkish language and adherence to Islam. Under the late Ottoman Empire, the region of Anatolia was overwhelmingly Muslim, and Muslims from other regions migrated into the region during the nationalist movements that occurred prior to the dissolution of the Empire.

in the nation, Menderes and the DP drew support heavily from rural areas of Turkey. Where Kemalism sought to weaken the religious underpinnings of Turkish society and break from traditionalism, the DP sought to maintain the pro-Western political ideologies without sacrificing religious values. Menderes and his party allocated resources to the building of mosques and religious institutions and implemented an opt-out system for religious education, making clear the party's continued dedication to the expression of religion in public life.¹⁸

Though Menderes maintained popularity amongst the rural peasantry of Turkey, there was increasing protestation amongst hardline Kemalists and the intelligentsia residing in Turkey's major cities. The DP's popularity suffered, losing 8.8% of votes from the 1954 to the 1957 elections.¹⁹ The dissatisfaction with the DP soon came to a head on 27 May 1960, when a group of military officers staged a coup to depose the Menderes administration, ultimately dealing a crushing blow to the DP, one from which it would not recover as it was disbanded in 1961.²⁰ As the coup and its aftermath unfolded, the hardline Kemalists who viewed Menderes' economic and social policies as being inherently in opposition to Ataturk's vision of the nation celebrated. While cosmopolitan cities welcomed the removal of Menderes, there was a general lack of support from rural areas, which overwhelmingly voted in support of the DP.²¹ On 17 December 1960, Adnan Menderes, having been found guilty of violating the constitution of Turkey, was hanged. His execution sent shockwaves around the world and marked the culmination of the first use of the military to quell a populist and openly Islamist party.²² It is worth mentioning that the military saw itself as the "guardian" of the state and of secularism.²³ This is crucial to our understanding because it provides insight into the role that the military believed it needed to play for the security of the state and would come to characterize the relationship between the military and democratically elected officials.

While the nation grappled with the effects of the 1960 coup, elections were held in 1961 to form a new government. The poll results were close, with the CHP and a new party, the *Adalet Partisi* (AP), coming within 2% of each other.²⁴ The AP, having been formed from the remnants of the DP, would mirror many of its predecessor's platform in order to ensure the cohesion of the party, including an emphasis on the Islamic character of the country and traditional values.²⁵ On the other hand, the CHP, realizing that there was much support to be gained from the *gecekondus* (shantytowns of major cities), adopted a more left leaning approach to social programs and the economy.²⁶ The coalition government formed between a right and left wing party was unstable, at best. Globally, the 1960s were a time of activism and social unrest, which permeated many aspects of Turkish society. Violent outbreaks, in which the police and military clashed with protestors, were not uncommon. Protests and political violence from left-wing organizations, often centered around student groups, were matched by the bombings and kidnappings carried out by right wing Islamist or militant nationalist organizations.²⁷ With such high levels of violence and political instability, a memorandum was handed down to the office of the Prime Minister on 12 March 1971 that threatened military intervention should the government fail to restore stability to the nation.²⁸ This coup was welcomed generally by a public that appreciated the overall lack of violence and the appearance of a peaceful transition of power. No new constitution was put into place and political parties were not reinstated, unlike the coup that had occurred a decade before.²⁹

Through the early 1970s, no party won an absolute majority, forcing the formation of coalition governments. The CHP and AP coalition were individually weak, unstable, and incoherent as they grappled with tensions and political violence between right and left.³⁰ The mid-1970s saw the rise of the *Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* (MHP), which won enough seats in

parliament to stand as a coherent opposition party. Believing the CHP had strayed too far from the ideals and actions set forth by the nation's founder, the MHP offered its unofficial support to the ultranationalist paramilitary wing known as the Grey Wolves in a move intended to counter the CHP's growing shift towards "left of center".³¹ The Grey Wolves' strategy of inciting political violence through targeted and retaliatory attacks eventually escalated to the assassinations of political officials and intellectuals.³² This level of violence was mirrored by left-wing organizations, though it is important to note that Leftist groups did not garner the same level of governmental support that the right-wing groups had. On 12 September 1980, tanks rolled into the streets and martial law was declared, the government was dismantled, and political parties were disbanded.³³ The generals saw the coup as a way of purging the political system and returning order to the nation by suppressing dissent and dissolving terrorist organizations. There was again a general level of acceptance and support for the coup by citizens of Turkey, who viewed the military takeover as a means of restoring political and economic order to the nation.³⁴ But most of all, the coup sparked hope for an end to the violent clashes between left and right-wing organizations. Though the 1980 coup does not at first glance appear to be an incident that directly impacted populism in the nation, it still provides critical insight into both the military and the underlying machinations of the Turkish political system. Take, for example, the governmental support for the Grey Wolves, a group that is considered to be a terrorist organization by the broader international community.³⁵ A general fear of government-backed extrajudicial actions would come to characterize the next two decades.

Though there are only four acknowledged coups or coup attempts in Turkish history (1960, 1971, 1980, and 2016), it is important to acknowledge the numerous alleged plots and covert schemes to overthrow regimes. The first of these alleged incidents occurred in 1993.

Turkey in the 1990s witnessed high levels of violence mainly due to the ongoing conflict with the Kurds. Some argue that a number of assassinations of political, military, and journalistic figures were carried out under the order of a covert wing of the Armed Forces to ensure that a peaceful resolution to the conflict would be nearly impossible.³⁶

In November 1996, a scandal rocked the Turkish nation and would bring to light the potential existence of a shadowy organization within the state that maintained the power to carry out the very type of extrajudicial activities that were beginning to come under scrutiny by 1993. The scandal arose from a car crash in the northwestern town of Susurluk, in which three of the four passengers were killed. Among the victims was the former Deputy Head of the Istanbul Police Department, an acting member of parliament, and a high-profile ultranationalist militant.³⁷ This scandal brought to light what would come to be known in Turkish as *derin devlet* or the “deep state”. At its core, the deep state was an enrooted element of Turkish society thought to exist within the Turkish Armed Forces along with civilian allies that maintained the ability to carry out activities without the approval of the democratic state.³⁸ Though the existence of a sort of shadow government was not openly acknowledged or investigated for over a decade, the deep state in Turkey would contribute to the growing distrust in the political system.

By 1997, the election the prior year of a coalition government headed by the openly Islamist party, *Refah Partisi* (RP), caused unease amongst many Turks who viewed the actions of the RP as signalling the beginning of an “Islamist takeover”.³⁹ This party was the most openly religious party to hold power and its rise marked a turning point in the growth of Islamist populism. While populism had been widely supported previously, on platforms focusing less on religion and more on nationalism, the RP very openly celebrated its religious ties and pious leaders.⁴⁰ It was possibly for this reason that on 28 February 1997, the Turkish National Security

Council delivered a list of measures to be carried out by the government in order to counter what they considered to be the biggest threat to the security and integrity of the republic: religious reactionism, or *irtica* in Turkish.⁴¹ This coup would come to be known as a “post-modern” coup, a term coined by Admiral Salim Dervişoğlu to describe a coup that is carried out without violence and in a generally peaceful nature.⁴² Army general Çevik Bir, one of the masterminds behind the military memorandum, described the role of the military as follows:

“In Turkey we have a marriage of Islam and democracy. (...) The child of this marriage is secularism. Now this child gets sick from time to time. The Turkish Armed Forces is the doctor which saves the child. Depending on how sick the kid is, we administer the necessary medicine to make sure the child recovers”⁴³

The Persistence of Populism in Turkish Politics

In the previous section, I have outlined a cycle in Turkish politics wherein populist elements gain traction in Turkish society only to be suppressed by the military through violent or (in the case of 1997) non-violent coups. In this context, it is clear that populism is not a recent phenomenon in Turkey and has been widely supported throughout the nation’s history. While the end of most populist parties comes at the onset of military intervention, perhaps the best way to illustrate the rise of these parties is through polling and voting data. Since the first multiparty election in 1946, a populist party has always remained on the ticket, often with new parties emerging from previously defunct or outlawed parties in the aftermath of a coup. As previously mentioned, the first opposition party to emerge in Turkey was populist. Though garnering little support in the 1946 election, by 1950 the popularity of the DP swept across the nation, resulting in a dramatic uptick in votes (gaining a whole 41.9% of votes within four years.)⁴⁴ The DP would maintain a relatively high level of popularity, losing some support in the lead up to the 1960 coup but maintaining 47% of votes in the 1957 elections.⁴⁵

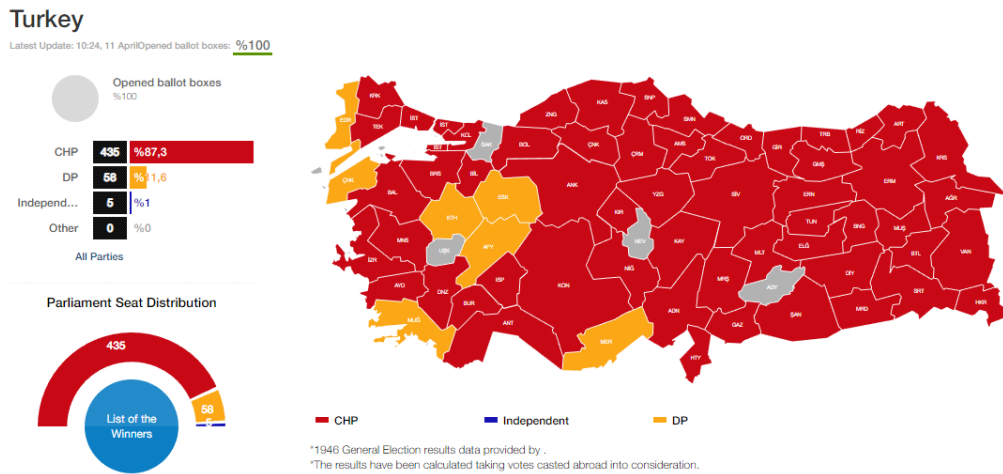


Figure 1. Election results from 1946 general election.

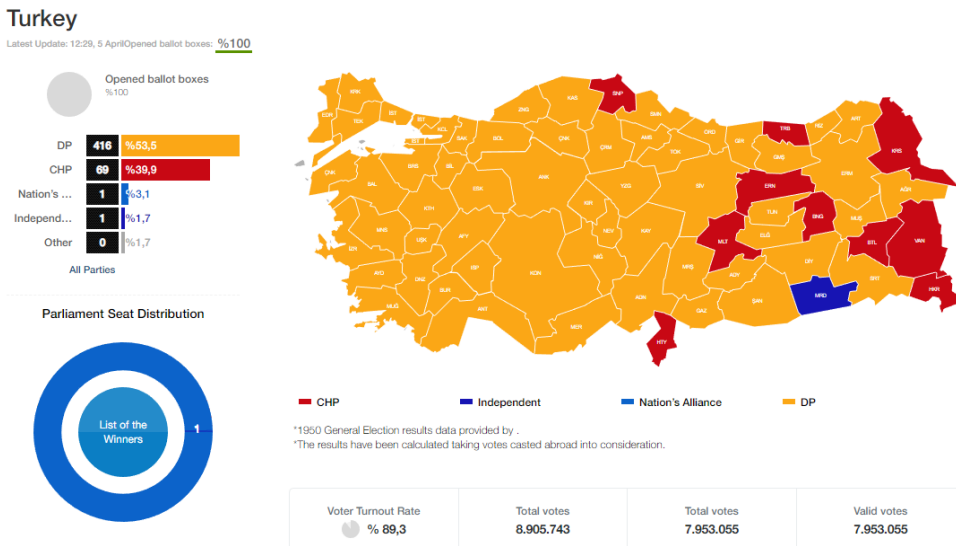


Figure 2. Election results from 1950 general election.

Following the 1960 coup, the DP was officially disbanded but the party platform and many of its supporters would remain and form the AP, the next major party to sweep elections.⁴⁶ The AP had major success in consolidating provinces previously held by the DP, however there

was a sharp drop in support for the AP in the years following 1971, with general support dropping from 46.6% in 1969 to 29.8% in 1973.⁴⁷ As previously mentioned, the coalition parties of the AP and CHP that were in power during 1971 were not forced to disband as they had been in the 1960 coup and would again in the coup of 1980. While the popularity of secularist parties witnessed an uptick post 1980, interestingly we see the emergence of a new party under the name *Halkçı Parti*, or very plainly, Populist Party, which was able to win 30.5% of the votes in the 1983 general elections.⁴⁸ Despite the history of coups suppressing populist parties in Turkey, new populist parties routinely emerged after the restoration of the democratic process in the aftermath of each coup, often from the remnants of previous defunct parties. This trend continued well into the next few decades with new parties such as the *Doğru Yol Partisi* (DYP), emerging in 1987 under former Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel, who had previously led the AP prior to its disbandment following the coup of 1980.⁴⁹ The DYP, given its continuation of platforms from previous parties, maintains much of the legacy of the DP and the AP.⁵⁰ By the 1990s, Turkey elected yet another populist party to power, the *Refah Partisi*. The party overall was not wildly successful, as the government was split and cabinet positions had to be divided between three political parties.⁵¹ However, the party is best known as the most openly religious party that had been elected to office and the last party to be successfully checked by the military. The RP stood as a crucial illustration of how much power the military had to remove parties deemed a threat to the secularist ideals of the nation. Though the coalition was removed from office within two years, the RP would remain the springboard for conservative parties looking to garner support and would ultimately pave the way for the rise of the AKP.

The Justice and Development Party (AKP)

Having established that populism was omnipresent in Turkish politics since the first multiparty elections in 1946, we can begin to understand the environment in which the modern populist movement found itself. In the following section, I will explain not only the rise of the current ruling party, but also the many ways in which it was a continuation of previous populist movements, with the marked advantage of possessing knowledge of past coups. The 1990s was a period of great instability in the Turkish Republic, characterized by weak coalition governments, violence particularly in the Kurdish regions, and scandals involving the “deep state”.⁵² Referred to as the “lost decade” by scholar Kerem Öktem, it was in this period that Turkey witnessed the rise of a man whose name would come to be synonymous with modern Turkey, current ruling president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.⁵³ Before his rise to international notoriety, Erdoğan had a long history in Turkish politics. He was active with the RP since 1984, serving as District and Provincial Head of the Welfare Party and gaining political influence among members of the party. With his standing with the RP solidified, he ran on the RP’s ticket in the 1994 mayoral elections, winning his bid for Mayor of Metropolitan Istanbul.⁵⁴ During a rally in 1997, he was arrested and imprisoned for “inciting religious hatred” for his reference to a poem by Ziya Gökalp, which many took to have deeply Islamist tones.⁵⁵ It is important to note that this event occurred just following the removal of the RP from national power, and it was not out of the realm of possibility that Erdoğan had been arrested out of fear of an Islamist-leaning mayor. Following his short stint in prison, and his subsequent removal from public office, he was allegedly quoted as saying, “dünya değişti ve ben de artık başka bir insanım”[the world has

changed, and I am a different person now].⁵⁶ ⁱⁱ With hindsight it is easy for one to say that this was in fact not the case, and that Erdoğan did not change his views, particularly on religion; however, at the time, a new version of the former mayor was emerging onto the public scene.

With the RP disbanded and following his release, Erdoğan and another former spokesperson for the RP, Abdullah Gül, struck out to form a new political party. The *Adelet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP, Justice and Development Party) aimed to carry on much of its predecessor's platform, but with the noted difference of maintaining its commitment to a democratic and conservative party without explicit religious ties.⁵⁷ A key point to make about the AKP's platform was the marked distance that the party created between itself and its predecessors. The party maintained that it was not a religious party and Erdoğan and Gül were most definitely not Islamist leaders, though they reaffirmed their pious beliefs. At the time, publicly showcasing one's religious beliefs was still relatively unheard of in Turkey, and both Gül and Erdoğan's wives were heavily criticized for wearing the headscarf, which was outlawed in all public governmental institutions until 2013.⁵⁸ The AKP sold itself not as a party of identity, but as a party looking to advance development and improve access to services for the average citizen. They gained popularity as a party that promised *güven ve istikrar* [trust and stability], which was a welcome prospect given the tumultuous decade.⁵⁹

The Turkish economy had experienced periods of instability throughout the 20th century. In an effort to lower inflation and counter the unsustainable trend of public spending, in part due to an increase in military expenses and the drain of the ongoing war against the Kurds, the Turkish government began to implement an exchange-rate-based stabilization program.⁶⁰ While

ⁱⁱ All translations from Turkish are my own. Many thanks to Bülent Bekçioğlu for checking my translations.

the decision to implement badly needed banking regulations and reforms was met with general support, there remained a relatively low level of commitment to the actual implementation process. By Autumn 2000, the absence of cash flow led to the devaluation of the Turkish lira by nearly 1/3 and the ensuing decision by the Turkish central bank to inject currency into the system caused widespread financial panic.⁶¹ On 23 February 2001, the exchange rate and the broader economic system collapsed.⁶² The repercussions of this would be devastating to the economy, as the Turkish lira fell by 50% and interest rates soared by nearly 5000% within a day of the crash.⁶³ Though successful efforts were made by the end of the year to stabilize the economy, it would take time for the country to rebuild from the financial crisis, a fact that the AKP knew and would fold into the rhetoric of the party.

Along this same vein, Erdoğan himself played heavily into the rhetoric of the pure versus the corrupt elite, painting himself as a “man of the people” or the protector of the oppressed.⁶⁴ Branding himself *Kasımpaşalılık* (one from the working class neighborhood of Kasımpaşa), Erdoğan used his ties to the working class to garner support from individuals who otherwise felt excluded from the political process.⁶⁵ Though established just over a year before the 2002 elections, the AKP garnered tremendous support, gaining 365 of the 550 parliamentary seats available.⁶⁶ The AKP’s conservative yet nonconfessional approach to politics and willingness to focus on development and financial stability was an extremely successful strategy for the burgeoning party. Following the 2002 election, Erdoğan was reported as saying, “Her kesimden oy aldık. Din eksenli değil, bir merkez partisi olduğumuzu gösterdik” [We got votes from all walks of life. We have shown that we are a centrist party, not religious centric.]⁶⁷

The idea of a Turkish party devoid of religious influence was not widely believed by Western media. Of the 288 English language news articles published worldwide on the AKP

between 1 October 2002 and 30 November 2002, 90.97% reported the party as having ties to Islam (or references to Islam).⁶⁸ It is important to note that this does not change the fact that the AKP was actively attempting to distance itself from religion, nor, I would argue, could it properly illustrate the influence of the bias that existed at the time on Western opinions of the AKP. The 2002 elections occurred just over a year after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the invasion of Afghanistan, when there was a measurable change in the level of hypersensitivity towards religion and Islam in the media.⁶⁹ It is also worth noting that 9/11 had major repercussions for Muslim nations, particularly in the Middle East, and would shape the presence of Islamist movements throughout the region. With the rising tide of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim rhetoric in Europe and the United States, many countries would focus on secularization. However, Turkey had the opportunity to brand itself as the epitome of a moderate Islamic nation, a nation that could be religious yet Western leaning and democratic at the same time.⁷⁰ Whether this factored into the AKP's rhetoric is not known, but it provides some background that can allow us to better understand where the party fit into domestic and international political spheres.

There is much debate over whether the AKP's choice in rhetoric was a deliberate means of ensuring the success of the party. On one hand, we could argue that the environment of the early 2000s was prime for the emergence of a party that promoted a form of moderate Islam that could coexist with a modern democratic system. On the other hand, the removal of Erdoğan's former party, the RP in 1997, may have granted him insight into ways to avoid being checked by the military. Or perhaps Erdoğan really had changed, and the party was truly not intended as an Islamist party. Regardless of what Erdoğan and the party's true intentions were at the time, the fear of religious reactionism, particularly by the secular military, would come to dominate the

relationship between the military and the AKP. Even though the first recognized coup attempt against the AKP would not occur until 2016, from 2003-2004 there emerged five alleged coup plots to counter the growing popularity of the party: “Balyoz Harekâtı”, “Sarıkız”, “Ayıışığı”, “Yakamoz” and “Eldiven”.⁷¹ Though none of these plots ever materialized, the existence of these plots meant the military still held tremendous power and the ability to impede populist parties. However, the existence of these plots would also be used as a mechanism for the AKP to counter military power in the years to come.

The Rise of a Modern Populist Party

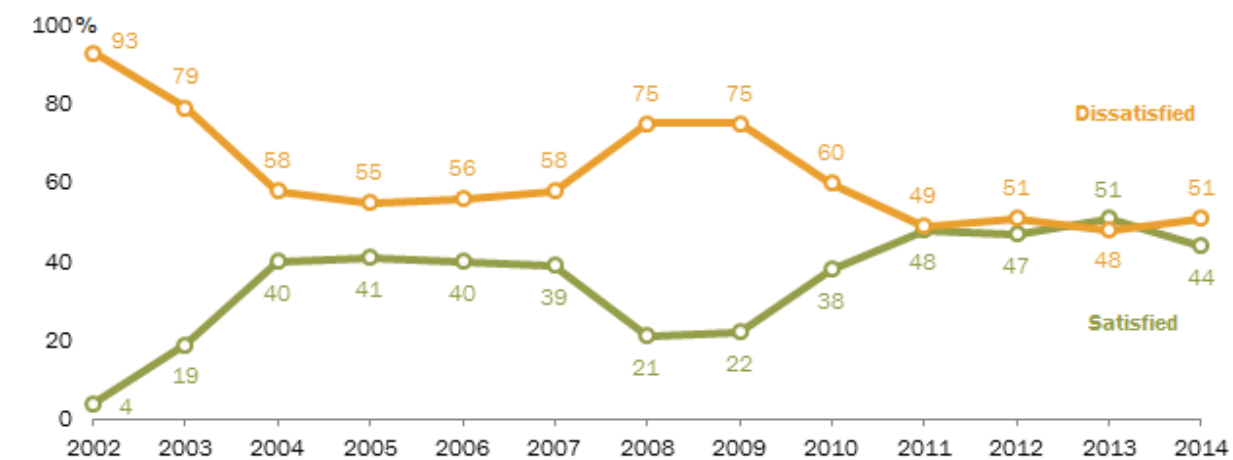
Erdoğan and the AKP were able to do what no other populist party had before them: survive and thrive in a system that was designed to quell such parties. I argue that this is not because the nation and its people experienced a paradigm shift in its views on Islam and the role of populism in politics, but rather they were able to systematically manipulate the political and social system to ensure the party’s survival. Specifically, using information learned from a long legacy of coups, the AKP dismantled the one effective check on the rise of populist leaders, and in turn ensured not only the survival of the AKP but also the ability for authoritarian leaders to rise and maintain power. To form my argument, I will begin by establishing the trajectory of the AKP after its election in 2002 and how it subsequently gained more power and began to stray away from the platform it ran on in its initial election.

The AKP and Erdoğan garnered tremendous support from the citizenry in 2002. Erdoğan came to power at a time when 93% of Turks were dissatisfied with the direction that their country was taking. As shown in Figure 3, within a year of the AKP taking power, this number dropped significantly and would continue to drop in the early years of the party.⁷² The mid-2000s saw rising support for the AKP given the economic policies and development projects that had

been put forward by the party. Between 2002 and 2007, the Turkish economy grew by an average of 7.2% per year.⁷³ Since the AKP took power, the average income rose from \$3,800 to approximately \$10,000 as recorded in 2017.⁷⁴ Poverty rates dropped from 30.3% in 2002 to 1.6% in 2015.⁷⁵ Economically, Turkey was booming under the AKP; however, by 2007 the nation would witness one of the worst political crises in the nation's recent history and a shift in the AKP's rhetoric.⁷⁶

Country Satisfaction in Turkey through the Years

Overall, are you ___ with the way things are going in our country today?



Source: Spring 2014 Global survey. Q5.

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Figure 3. Turk's satisfaction with the direction of the country, 2002-2014.

Following the end of a presidential term, the 2007 elections saw the AKP putting forward Abdullah Gül as a presidential candidate, a man who many in parliament suspected would further AKP interests -- interests that many believed to be in opposition to the nationalistic and secularist principles of the state.⁷⁷ In the leadup to these elections, Istanbul saw hundreds of thousands of protestors take to the streets to rally against the growing encroachment of Islam in

government and to stand in defense of secularism.⁷⁸ Even the military took a less than subtle approach towards the election candidate, stating:

“In recent days, the problem during the presidential election has focused on secularism discussions... This situation has been anxiously followed by the Turkish armed forces. The Turkish armed forces maintains its firm determination to carry out its clearly specified duties to protect these principles and has absolute loyalty and belief in this determination.”⁷⁹

Because the AKP did not hold a two-thirds majority in parliament, the party was unable to push Gül through and so in a move that shocked many, Erdoğan called for snap elections to be held. He also put forward constitutional amendments that would call for several changes to the election process, most notably the direct election of the president, an extension of the presidential term limits, and a change in the definition of parliamentary quorum, a move which was intended to ensure that fewer votes were necessary to pass a candidate through.⁸⁰ These amendments were accepted by parliament and Gül was eventually sworn in as president.

It was at this point that the AKP arguably began to become emboldened with their successes and started to enact policies that more closely aligned with previous populist and Islamist parties. The sector with the most staggering shift in statistical accounts was that of the *Diyanet*, or the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs. The *Diyanet* is a state-run institution established in 1924 that was intended to provide religious services and enlighten the society about Islam. The organization has also historically served as a tool to broadcast the state’s official position regarding religious matters.⁸¹ Under the AKP, the *Diyanet* saw a dramatic rise in the amount of taxpayer funding it receives, gaining a 176% budget increase between 2002 and 2012.⁸² By 2016, the *Diyanet* had a total budget of 5.6 billion liras (or about 2.16 billion USD according to 2016 exchange rates), more than the budget of twelve other ministries.⁸³ Budget

allocation towards religious affairs was not the only step taken by the AKP that diverged from their 2002 nonconfessional stance. While Erdoğan's wife notably wore the Islamic headscarf in public, there existed a decades-long ban on the headscarf in public institutions and government. In 2013, the AKP would fully lift the ban and allow civil servants to wear the headscarf without repercussions.⁸⁴ While supporters of Erdoğan and the AKP touted this move as an end to the oppression of Muslim women, opposition forces feared further encroachment of Islamist values.

If we look at past populist and Islamist movements in Turkey, the actions of these parties were severely limited by the threat of military intervention. Yet with the AKP, we see the emergence of a party that not only shared similar rhetoric with previous parties like the RP, but additionally acted upon much of this rhetoric in ways that would not have been possible earlier. So, what was different this time? I would argue that there was no shift in Turkish society towards a greater acceptance of Islamist ideals in the national government. Instead, I contend that the AKP, learning from a history of past coups, had been working in the background to enact laws and pull apart dissenting movements to ensure that they were able to carry out their intended actions. In the following section, I justify this interpretation of events.

Dismantling the Opposition

In this section, I illustrate the steps taken by the party since its election to power in 2002 and how it was able to carry out long term plans to rise to its current status as a powerful and openly populist party. The AKP was able to do this in two ways: first, through the crackdown on dissenting opinions and critics, and second, through the slow dismantling of the deep state and the military. To best display this, I have presented several case studies that illustrate the actions taken by the AKP to remove opposition and dismantle the one check that had previously stopped the rise of populist parties. The ability for the military to successfully carry out a coup remained

a major threat to the AKP and the rise of a leader like Erdoğan, as it had since 1960. The actions taken between 2002 and the coup attempt of 2016 would drastically change the political landscape and the role that the military and dissenting figures played in the political process. Focusing less on a chronology of events and more on thematic issues, I explain why the steps taken by the AKP likely caused the 2016 coup attempt to fail.

As with many authoritarian regimes, social media and freedom of the press remain potential barriers to the success of a party. The AKP has utilized the suppression of these powers extensively. This is not to say that censorship was not present prior to the AKP, but there existed a steady seven-year decline in press freedoms beginning in 2010.⁸⁵ Freedom House's rating system for press freedoms rated Turkey at 54 in 2010 (with 100 being the least free), but by 2016 this number rose to 71.⁸⁶ The general vagueness of the constitutional articles relating to press freedoms are only further weakened by the Turkish penal code and the country's antiterrorism laws, which allow for the prosecution of broad swathes of society under legal precedence.⁸⁷ One example of how the AKP utilized the vague nature of these laws was the Peace Petition trials, in which 146 academics were put on trial for spreading terrorist propaganda after signing a petition calling for peace between the Kurds and the Turkish Armed Forces. An additional 463 academics who signed were dismissed from their positions, with 380 of them being barred from public service.⁸⁸ The vague nature of these laws and the guise of national security also allowed for several periods of internet clampdown between 2002 and 2016, most notably the 2007 ban on YouTube and the 2014 ban on YouTube and Twitter, which were enacted in response to the widespread use of social media during the Gezi Park protests.⁸⁹ⁱⁱⁱ For the sake of clarity, I

ⁱⁱⁱ The Gezi Park protests were a wave of demonstrations that occurred in 2013 in response to an urban development project in Istanbul. Police suppression of the protests led to more than 8,000 injuries and five deaths.

distinguish between the crackdown on freedom of speech and the AKP's attempts at dismantling the deep state apparatus. However, the AKP and Erdoğan would systematically target dissenting figures both online and in print media, as they considered many opposition journalists to be part of a conspiratory mechanism.

Though highly contested, it is worth noting that there is speculation regarding the validity of elections in Turkey over the past decade. As mentioned previously, the 2007 elections illustrated that snap elections could provide more advantageous outcomes for the AKP. Another instance where this tactic was used was during the 2015 general elections. After losing its majority in parliament during the June elections, the AKP called for a snap election to be held in November 2015. Shortly after the June elections, a bombing occurred in the south-eastern district of Suruç, killing 34 and injuring 76, most of whom were Kurds. Though officially claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, in the following days three Turkish policemen were killed by Kurdish militants in acts of retaliation, reigniting the Kurdish conflict and all but ending the ceasefire in the region.⁹⁰ One can speculate as to whether this was a deliberate means of ensuring a more favorable outcome when snap elections were held, or if it was merely coincidental that the ceasefire ended at this time. Regardless, the snap elections did yield a significantly more positive outcome for the AKP. Looking at the variance in the two elections, the number of votes for the CHP remained relatively consistent, while the MHP and the Kurdish People's Democracy Party (HDP) lost a combined 3 million votes. The November election also saw an additional 1.3 million votes being cast, all together increasing the number of votes for the AKP by about 4.5 million.⁹¹ This dramatic shift in voting patterns also drew suspicion for the possibility of vote tampering, though no official evidence was ever brought forward that could definitively prove interference. While there may not be evidence of voter fraud or tampering, the election illustrated

the AKP's general lack of support for the democratic process, and willingness to manipulate elections to gain more positive results. Arguably the most impactful action taken by the AKP occurred in 2007. Not only did 2007 witness the contentious election, as previously mentioned, but it also saw the beginning of what would come to be known as the Ergenekon trials.^{92iv} In June 2007, Istanbul Police stumbled upon a cache of nearly 30 hand grenades while executing a search warrant, and subsequent investigations would lead to the uncovering of a series of unacted coup plots against the AKP.⁹³ The subsequent trials allowed the party to take the first, and biggest, step towards the dismantling of the military apparatus. The trials spanned over five years and delivered a total of 17 life sentences to suspected members of the deep state, including prominent military, academic, and journalistic figures.⁹⁴ The revelation that a shadow government existed within the state also validated what many Turks had suspected for years regarding the "freeness" of their democracy. Erdoğan was able to capitalize on this fear and frustration towards the old state system and further push the rhetoric that he was moving Turkey towards a more free and democratic state by returning control to the people. Under the pretext of anti-government conspiracy, Erdoğan used the threat of military coups as a reason to punish those who maintained the ability to carry them out. In a way, he used the very power possessed by the military apparatus against itself. This would not be the last time that Erdoğan looked to try members of the military that had participated in past coups. In 2013, he brought charges against over 100 individuals for their role in the 1993 alleged assassination of Prime Minister Turgut Özal and the 1997 post-modern coup, ultimately sentencing several to life in prison.⁹⁵ The AKP's ability to endure plots to overthrow the government all but ensured its continued survival. Not only did it allow for the AKP to continue to retain its hold on the government, but it also

^{iv} Ergenekon was a term coined in 1997 to describe the deep state.

allowed Erdoğan to gain more power through the highly publicized trials and subsequent jailing of opposition figures. While these events were seen as a witch hunt by many, it sent a clear message to the military not to attempt to stage another coup.⁹⁶

Yet with this clear warning established, on 15 July 2016, the military did just that. Tanks and armed soldiers took to the streets in an attempt to take control of the government, in a night that would leave 241 people dead and another 2,194 injured.⁹⁷ This attempt was different in a number of ways, the first being the relatively small number of active military participants. According to Turkish military officials, 8,651 members, or 1.5% of the armed forces, participated in the failed coup attempt.⁹⁸ With relatively few military personnel engaged in the plot, questions emerged regarding who was behind the failed coup attempt. In an unprecedented move Erdoğan lay the blame squarely on one man, U.S. based cleric Fethullah Gülen.⁹⁹ Fethullah Gülen gained significant power in Turkey over the last several decades, garnering broad support and followers through his dedication to education and other social issues amongst the conservative Sunni population. Though Gülen strongly affirmed that neither himself nor his followers, known as Gülenists, had political aspirations, many of his followers had taken jobs within the state apparatus over the years.¹⁰⁰ Though promoting altruism and education, the group came under heavy scrutiny in 1999 for being a secretive organization when a video emerged showing the cleric advising his pupils to “lie low and cover their religious identities.” In an indictment accusing him of undermining the secular order, he was described as “the strongest and most effective Islamic fundamentalist in Turkey”. It is worth noting that Erdoğan once maintained a strategic alliance with Gülen, given the overlap in their target audience. However, as the cleric gained more power, Erdoğan and Gülen’s relationship rapidly declined. Even from his home in Pennsylvania, Erdoğan considered Gülen a threat, branding sympathizers as

members of FETÖ or the Gülenist Terror Organization, and establishing Gülen as the organization's leader, thereby listing him as one of Turkey's most wanted terrorists.¹⁰¹ Erdoğan was not alone in his blame of Fethullah Gülen for the coup attempt, a survey conducted by pollsters in Turkey found that 64.4% of respondents believed Gülen to be behind the coup plot.¹⁰²

Yet this was not the only thing that set the coup attempt apart from previous plots. For the first time during a coup, the *Adhan* or call to prayer rang out across Turkey as mosques, choosing to use this call outside of its normal schedule, called upon civilians to take to the streets and resist the military.¹⁰³ From the Western perspective it may be difficult to understand how abnormal this would have been. Though we have established that Turkey is a Muslim majority nation, it is extremely abnormal to see a religious act being used to rally support for a political figure or rally individuals against a military coup. Erdoğan himself used local media to broadcast a message to his "loyal citizens" to fight back against the coup plotters, stating:

"I want to call out to my nation: I urge the Turkish people to take to the streets of our cities, and to convene at our public squares and our airports. Let us gather at our squares and airports — and let them come with their tanks and cannons. Let them do what they will. I have yet to see any power greater than that of the people."¹⁰⁴

Thousands of civilians responded to this call, facing armed military forces often with nothing more than handheld tools or kitchen utensils.¹⁰⁵ There is debate over why civilians took to the streets. Many argue that it was out of defense of Erdoğan, who still maintained hefty support from conservatives and pious Turks. Yet, there were many who took to the streets who did not support the AKP or its policies. It is arguably too idealistic to frame the resistance as a defense of the democratic process or democracy, as this notion is so abstract that it was likely not the reason civilians took to the streets. It is far more likely that the legacy of past coups had left Turks less than enthusiastic to witness another military takeover, no matter their stance on Erdoğan and the

AKP.¹⁰⁶ Whatever the reasons, the military was ultimately doomed to fail out of a lack of public and broad military support.

The End of Coup d'état in Turkey?

The failed coup attempt in 2016 signaled the final blow to the military and allowed for the complete consolidation of power under the AKP. The weeks and months following the coup attempt saw large numbers of individuals being relieved of positions or jailed for conspiring to overthrow the government, including those who were accused of being affiliated with Fethullah Gülen . It was estimated that approximately 35,000 individuals had been detained following the coup attempt, with a large portion being charged in the weeks to come.¹⁰⁷ By most estimates, there was about a 38-40% reduction in the number of generals in the military with approximately 151 generals or admirals being arrested (about 1/3 of the general-rank command) and an additional approximately 400 military envoys being relieved of duty.¹⁰⁸ According to a military dispatch, 149 military envoys posted to NATO headquarters and command centers in Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Britain were ordered back to Turkey, with a large number of these being fired or imprisoned upon their return.¹⁰⁹ The ability to manipulate the vague language of the Turkish Penal Code meant that it was relatively easy to charge individuals with crimes and imprison them on charges of terrorism or threats to national security. Under the guise of delivering justice to those involved in the coup attempt, the actions by the Turkish government in 2016 more closely resembled a purge than a removal of actual tangible threats. As illustrated in Figure 4, we see that the sweeping nature of the post-2016 purges affected not only the military but also a wide variety of other critical positions within the state.

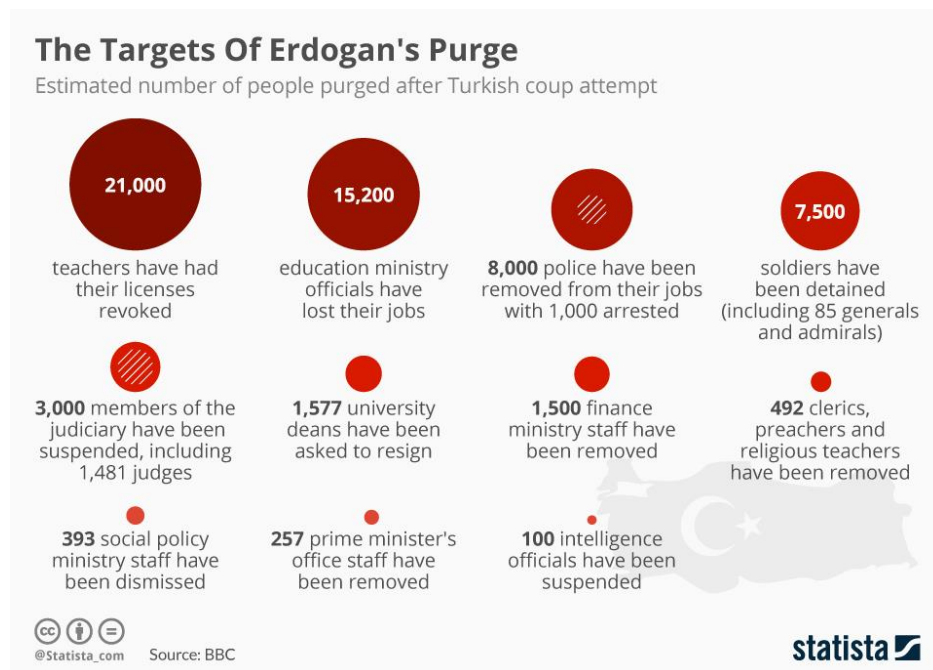


Figure 4. Estimates of post-2016 coup attempt purges on different sectors.

What made the post-coup purge most alarming was not the military reduction, but the systematic removal of opposition among academics, police, and journalists. This type of purge had only been witnessed in Turkey after the 1980 coup, when the interim military coalition purged all semblances of the previous party from the system (particularly Leftists). However, the 1980 coup was successful and the purge was carried out by the military, while the 2016 attempt was not successful and the purge is being carried out by the elected government. Erdoğan and the AKP mirrored the strategy used in 1980 but worked against the very system that had previously succeeded against the democratically elected government. Arguably capitalizing on the previous purges carried out during the Ergenekon and subsequent trials, Erdoğan again had the opportunity to further dismantle opposition forces. Using many of the same techniques previously mentioned, the post-coup period saw further crackdowns on freedom of speech and press freedoms. Within a week of the coup, Turkish officials issued arrest warrants for 42

journalists with apparent links to the attempted coup.¹¹⁰ According to Amnesty International, as of 2018 it is estimated that approximately 120 journalists are still imprisoned following the 2016 coup attempt.^{111v} The government further utilized the post-coup environment as an excuse to establish a state of emergency that lasted nearly two years and was not lifted until July 2018. During this time, the state was able to consolidate control and expand political powers allowing for further crackdowns on dissenting figures.¹¹²

After the failed coup attempt of 2016 and the subsequent post-coup purges, Turkey finds itself in a precarious position politically and socially. While one could argue that Erdoğan and the AKP successfully secured a future for a populist party and allowed for the dominance of a brand of political parties once suppressed by the military, all was not well. The failure of the coup, touted by some in the international community as a demonstration of the “strength of Turkey’s democracy”, did not necessarily result in a stronger and more democratically free Turkey.¹¹³ While I am by no means arguing for military interventionism, the removal of this check did not have entirely positive results for Turkey. With the one true check on the rise of a party removed, the AKP and Erdoğan in particular no longer have any barriers blocking further gain of power. This was recently indicated by the 2017 constitutional referendum which started the nation on a path away from a parliamentary system and towards a presidential system in which the office of the Prime Minister was abolished, granting full executive privilege to the president, Erdoğan himself.¹¹⁴ On the matter, Erdoğan claimed:

"Even though the president and government are working in unison, the diseases of the old system confront us at every step we take... Developments in Syria and elsewhere have made it urgent to switch to the new executive system in order to take steps for our country's future in a stronger way."¹¹⁵

^v Turkey currently jails more journalists than any other country.

With the AKP's resounding victory in the 2018 elections, further fears emerged regarding the future of a free and democratic Turkey.¹¹⁶ The post-coup purge of academics, law enforcement, the military, and numerous other sectors all but eliminated opposition and allowed for the rhetoric and system to be entirely dominated by one party: the AKP.

Beginning in an environment where the threat of coups meant that the AKP was limited on its platform and ability to expand its power, the current environment has removed the threat of military interventionism. The AKP, existing in the current environment, no longer must fear the military quelling its power, unlike previous populist parties. In this regard, modern populism in Turkey is no longer bound by a slim rhetoric that was approved by the military out of fear of being deposed. With the successful culling of opposition within the military it is highly unlikely that a coup will occur within Turkey in the next decade. The military is too fractured to be able to put up any sort of opposition, even against a party that is known publicly to abuse its power. What does this mean for populism in Turkey? On one hand, the almost complete dismantling of dissenting figures could be viewed as a success in the history of populist movements in Turkey; yet, this has only pushed the nation further away from the very democratic ideals that it touted. The actions taken by Erdoğan and his party work as a double-edged sword. With any barrier to the advancement of the party removed, the AKP has been allowed to take sweeping control of the country, marginalizing groups of people and using many of the same tactics the military used to suppress dissenting figures and opinions within the nation. To truly function as a democratic state, Turkey will need to regain a functioning form of checks and balances to replace the status of the military within the political system, allowing there to remain a check on presidential power, but one which does not restrict political movements and freedom of speech.

Conclusion

This paper has established that populism was historically extremely prevalent in Turkey and allowed a large portion of Turkish society that considered itself marginalized to have a voice in government. But populist parties were kept in constant check by the military, which greatly limited the powers of the party and the broader populist movement. Coups stand in as marked instances of the unlawful use of power held by the military and created a cyclical system in Turkish politics with repeating instances of military intervention. The subsequent removal of political parties led to an environment of fragmented defunct parties shifting and morphing into new entities to maintain any semblance of post-coup cohesion or continuity. The modern legacy of this system is the AKP, which under figurehead Erdoğan would be able to stand as a successful populist and Islamist party. Yet this was only possible because of the precedent of past coups and the impacts they had on previous movements. Learning from a history of military interventionism, the AKP, without openly challenging the military, instead launched a covert campaign to dismantle the one non-democratic mechanism that maintained the power to depose it. As previously mentioned, it is reasonable to condemn the outbreak of coups in Turkey, as they exist outside of the democratic process and often are accompanied by instances of violence. Yet even with the extra-judicial nature of coups, the military and deep state played a key role in the political process and the state system. Their subsequent removal created a power vacuum, leaving Turkey devoid of any entity powerful enough to enact a system of checks and balances to prevent the rise of authoritarian regimes. With that being said, military interventionism is not a positive indicator of a successful state and should not be used as a democratic check on the political system.

With the removal of coups as a mechanism of suppression in the Turkish political system, it is simplistic to suggest that this results in a more free and democratic state in which there is more faith in the democratic process and the ability for the people to decide the fate of a nation. Yet the actions taken by a democratically elected official and party may not always be democratic themselves. The purging of the military from the political system, while in theory opening the way for a freer and more democratic state, has also opened the way for a party to seize power armed with the knowledge that it can no longer be deposed. Now a populist party has found itself in complete control of not only the national government, but also the broader support system and other private enterprises. If the only goal of the populist movement was to establish itself within the government and maintain a hold on power, then the populist movement, as embodied by the AKP, has reached the epitome of success. It has done what no previous populist party was able to achieve. If a populist Islamist party holds control of the government after decades of struggling to maintain power, where does the movement go from here? If the AKP maintains its hold as a populist party, which is likely given the recent elections and effort to consolidate power, then one could suggest that the nation will continue its current trajectory away from a more secular and open state. Or perhaps the fallout from the post-coup purges will open the country up to other populist leaders that can act as a counterbalance to the AKP's power. Unfortunately, any attempt at analyzing the future trajectory of populism in Turkey is limited by the narrow window of time within which it is written. Turkey has been molded by a history of coups, both successful and not, and the legacy of these instances of military intervention have forever shaped the political landscape and the role of populism in the nation. Time will tell what course Turkey will take, but the removal of the military from the

political apparatus all but ensures that there is no historically tested way, whether democratic or not, to remove a party once it becomes too powerful.

Turkey is but one of many countries that have witnessed the growth of a brand of politics, that while appearing to represent the will of the people, often only furthers the self-interests of a small subsection. Globally, we see the rise of strong charismatic leaders within democratic systems who, with the power granted to them by the citizenry, have stirred fears of the rise of authoritarianism. And we see Turkey, which followed a similar trajectory. Perhaps how and why populism has succeeded in Turkey, despite all the barriers to its success, can help us understand and contextualize the growing trend of populism worldwide.

Appendix

Methods

I conducted the majority of my background research using published histories of modern Turkey, focusing on the specific eras within which coups occurred. I supplemented these texts with specific articles and journals when more in- depth information was required. For the bulk of my argument, I aimed to synthesize polling data, firsthand accounts and newspapers, as well as published videos in order to offer one possible interpretation of current events. With my background mainly situated in historical study, I approached the topic of populism in the AKP from a historical perspective. Believing that current movements and actions are rooted in the past, I used the history of coups as a way of understanding and contextualizing the relationship between populist parties and the broader political system, particularly the military, in order to expand our understanding of Turkey today.

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